Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

BTS and the Labor of Techno-Orientalism

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ABSTRACT This article makes the case that the discourse around K-pop supergroup BTS and their fans—known as ARMY—marks an intersection between techno-Orientalism, the abstraction and demonization of Asian labor, and Korea in the US imperial imaginary. BTS exemplifies what I suggest is a contemporary form of Asian racialization that emphasizes the Asian figure as embodying a series of seeming contradictions between the synthetic/mechanistic and the undeveloped/primordial. BTS reveals the ways that these threads of racialization do not contradict but rather complement each other, explaining how narratives marveling at the group's technical proficiency/synchronicity/productivity can exist side by side with suggestions that their musical output is the result of a labor that is denigrated because it is perceived as being mechanized, abstract, and devoid of the qualities of artistry and creativity exclusively associated with Western modernity.

KEYWORDS music, popular culture, racialization, techno-Orientalism

Introduction

On June 2, 2021, Tom Breihan published an article titled "BTS and Their Fan Army Are Rendering the Pop Charts Useless," on StereoGum.com, a website devoted to music news and commentary. In the piece Breihan argued that BTS's just-released single "Butter," which debuted at the #1 spot on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and proceeded to stay there for a total of ten non-consecutive weeks, did not deserve that coveted position.[1] Breihan noted that *Billboard* calculates its Hot 100 list based on a combination of radio play, streaming, and sales, including

downloads. Because “Butter” had a negligible presence on US radio waves (an omission that Breihan doesn’t address) and respectable but not overwhelming streaming numbers, Breihan attributed “Butter’s” ascendance to the top of the Hot 100 almost entirely to BTS fans—widely known as ARMY, “Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth”—purchasing and repurchasing the $.69 single as well as six other digital versions that the band released, sales of which were aggregated to arrive at the #1 ranking. It is this fact—that ARMY was buying “Butter” multiply and across different versions—that drove Breihan to declare that “‘Butter’ is not the most popular song in America right now.”[2] Brehan argues that BTS’s and ARMY’s manipulation of the *Billboard* charting system gives “a completely distorted idea of how popular BTS is.”[3] Breihan goes on to state that “organic popularity, once the driving force behind pop music, barely feels like it exists anymore. Instead, the pop charts are turning into a battlefield for warring stan armies.”[4]

Breihan was not the only critic to complain about the “distorted popularity” of BTS or invoke the band’s use of “warring stan armies” to establish its musical dominance. Mark Grondin, a YouTube creator and music critic, echoed Breihan’s rhetoric when he stated that the popularity of “Butter” was about “the furthest thing from” “organic” one could imagine.[5] Grondin followed up with a lament, asking are we “really now at the point [that] to prop up a band’s popularity to the general public the label has convinced stans to buy multiple copies of the exact same song?”[6] In an article for *Slate*, critic Chris Molanphy conceded that the song’s performance on the Hot 100 was the result of “legitimate chart math,” but declared that unlike previous #1 Billboard summer hits—“‘California Girls,’ ‘Call Me Maybe,’ ‘Blurred Lines,’ ‘One Dance,’ ‘Despacito,’ and ‘Old Town Road’”—“Butter” is a “song fewer *Americans* than ever are likely to have heard.”[7] Earlier that summer, Molanphy referred to “Butter” as a “Potemkin village of a hit, propped up by its faithful ARMY.”[8]

What interests me about this hand-wringing isn't the attempt to preserve the fiction that rankings like the *Billboard* Hot 100 are an authentic reflection of musical taste,[9] but rather the pervasiveness of a discourse that insists that BTS's music isn't "organic," that the group's success is the result of "chart math," or that their chart-topping hits are an illegitimate sham propped up by the manipulations of the group or its fans. The *OED* defines "organic" as a quality that is "inherent in a living being" or "natural," "characterized by connection or coordination of parts into a single, harmonious whole," or "relating to or designating compounds which exist naturally as constituents of living organisms." Breihan and Grondin's characterizations of the US pop charts as historically an expression of "organic" popularity and BTS's rise as an indicator of the group's "inorganic" nature suggests that there is something inherently inhuman or unwholesome about BTS, their music, and the fans' support of them; this robotic quality in turn has disrupted the heretofore "organic" rhythms and measures of the US music industry. These types of charges will be familiar to anyone with a knowledge of Asian American history because they index some of the most prevalent forms of Asian racialization in the twenty-first century. They indicate the extent to which BTS—who are Korean in origin and global in their appeal—is nevertheless still subject to the disciplines of Asian racial formation within the United States. Despite their stated commitment to their Korean identity and their interest in globalizing K-pop,[10] once the group entered the spaces of US domestic culture (and it did so at a relatively early point in its history, with the 2014 docuseries *American Hustle Life*), BTS became subject to the racializing discourses that have dominated the nation's approach to Asians in the US for the past 150 years.

It is important to note, however, that the particular form of Asian racialization that BTS has been subject to over the past decade is distinct from the more familiar yellow peril or model minority narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article makes the case that the discourse around K-pop more broadly and BTS in particular marks an intersection between techno-Orientalism, the abstraction and demonization of Asian labor, and Korea in the US imperial

imaginary. In the case of BTS, whose members are RM (Kim Nam-joon), Jin (Kim Seokjin), Suga (Min Yoongi), J-Hope (Jung Hoseok), Jimin (Park Jimin), V (Kim Taehyung), and Jungkook (Jeon Jungkook), these threads of racialization do not contradict but rather complement each other, explaining why both positive and critical assessments of the group tend to emphasize the groups technical exemplarity (as well as the technological savvy of their fanbase) even as they express skepticism about the group's "real" popularity. In making this argument, I will not be focusing on the more overt and typical acts of racist, sexist, and homophobic aggression to which the members are frequently subject, although I am certainly not discounting them as acts of violence and exclusion."[11] Rather, my focus is on how popular discourse around the success of K-pop and BTS engages in techno-Orientalist tropes that marvel at the technical proficiency of K-pop performers and the K-pop industry while at the same time denigrating their labor and their artistic output as mechanized, abstract, and devoid of the qualities of creativity exclusively associated with Western modernity. This assessment also applies to ARMY, who are frequently impugned as "bots" or "15-year-old girls,"[12] despite the documented diversity of the fandom.[13] My point is that this particular narrative of Asian racial formation is pervasive in US culture and that its very omnipresence is made all the clearer by the fact that it is applied so persistently to BTS. As the biggest K-pop band in the world, BTS isn't an exception to techno-Orientalist logic, in other words, but rather the sign of its ubiquity.

I conclude this essay with a brief exploration of how COVID-19 informed BTS's racialization in the US. It is motivated by a seeming paradox: how did a boy band from Korea become the most popular musical group in the United States at the height of a pandemic that witnessed a surge in and awareness of anti-Asian violence and racism?[14] I would argue that BTS's heightened acclaim and visibility at the very moment that saw a huge spike in overt acts of physical and rhetorical violence against Asians is not a sign of the nation's desire to envision or provide a more just future for its racially marginalized inhabitants. Rather, BTS's rise during

COVID-19 suggests that the pandemic intensified the association between Asian racial formation and techno-Orientalist and colonized labor.

Techno-Orientalism and the Un-Representable

In their influential volume, David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu define techno-Orientalism as "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in *hypo*– or *hyper*technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse."[15] I'll be returning to the dichotomous aspect of techno-Orientalism later in this article, but for now, I'll note that the term is most frequently used to characterize Asia as a site of "high technology, enforced consumption, and excessive advertising."[16] Both Orientalism and techno-Orientalism reflect the geopolitical anxieties of the West in the eras in which they respectively emerged. Nevertheless, although techno-Orientalism has its roots in Edward Said's theorizations of Orientalism, the "Orient" of Said's Orientalism is markedly different from the "Orient" of techno-Orientalism. Orientalism spoke of an Orient whose "great moments were in the past," and whose residents were only useful "in the modern world" due to the West's efforts to "[bring] them out of the wretchedness of their decline and [turn] them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies."[17] Media scholar Toshiya Ueno notes that "if the Orient was constructed and invented by the West to build up its cultural identity, then the Techno-Orient has been invented to define the image and models of information capitalism and the information society."[18] Further, techno-Orientalism represents a reorientation of the temporal relationship embedded in Orientalism; as David Morley and Kevin Robins note, Orientalism's "traditional equation of the West with modernity and of the Orient with the exotic (but underdeveloped) past is thrown into crisis as the dynamic hub of the world economy is increasingly perceived to have moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific Rim."[19] Roh, Huang, and Niu argue that, "while Orientalism defines a

modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern East, techno-Orientalism symmetrically and yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive, futurized Asia to further reaffirm the West's centrality."[20] This is an important aspect of techno-Orientalist discourse: as much as it expresses the West's anxieties about a technological Asia, it also affirms the West's superiority vis-à-vis Asia since it assumes that the industrial advances introduced during occupation and colonization created the conditions for the techno-Orient's rise. Roh, Huang, and Niu point to the underlying threat that the technological Orient represents: "the Orient is now, in a sense, more West than the West, a simulacrum that threatens the foundational fiction of the West as Future."[21]

While techno-Orientalism first emerged in response to an economically surging Japan, it has for the past few decades been increasingly applied to China. The techno-Orientalist narrative that the "simulacrum" of the "East" has coopted the modernity that rightly belongs to the "West" is particularly on display in the way that the economic relationship between China and the United States is constructed. Lok Siu and Claire Chun, in their article analyzing the impact of techno-Orientalism on anti-Chinese discourse in the twenty-first century, argue that the "racial trope of the Chinese 'scientist-as spy'—quite resonant of the 'evil criminal genius' of the fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu," has become the most visible manifestation of yellow peril discourse in the last two decades.[22] Whereas Sinophobia of the early twentieth century tended to imagine Chinese villainy through activities such as drug or human trafficking, contemporary yellow peril narratives represent the Chinese as engaging in scientific espionage in order to capitalize on a "global market driven by scientific-technological innovation."[23] The techno-Orientalist strain of yellow peril discourse is perhaps most visible in the numerous prosecutions of Chinese American or Chinese diasporic scientists for stealing US trade or governmental secrets.[24] Even scientists of non-Chinese descent have come under suspicion for spying if they are seen as working too closely with Chinese academic or industrial institutions.[25] The steady drumbeat of these stories, along with more spectacular ones like the Chinese spy balloon that

floated over the United States in the summer of 2023, contribute to a generalized impression that the Chinese will go to any lengths in order to spy on or steal American technological discoveries.

While I agree with Siu and and Chun that the Chinese scientist has become the contemporary figure of yellow peril hysteria, I would argue that what is characteristic of Asian racialization in the twenty-first century is the bifurcation between hyper and hypo that techno-Orientalism contains. What defines these narratives for me is the juxtaposition between Chinese skill in using and stealing advanced technology and their seeming inability to develop that technology on their own. In a *New York Times* investigative article on the topic of Chinese technological espionage, reporter Yudhijit Bhattacharjee explains how, in a "kind of delicious reversal," the FBI were able to identify and capture a Chinese spymaster because of his extensive use of his iPhone and iCloud, technologies that are the "result of American technological prowess" and that are now being used in the "fight back against a rival nation's efforts to steal technology."[26] Bhattarcharjee takes pains to note the irony of the Chinese spy's capture: the Chinese government's relentless pursuit of high-tech aviation technology, all undone by a Chinese spy's reliance upon his Apple products. There is a dichotomy at work in this article and others like it, on the one hand, portraying the Chinese as incapable of creating technological innovations and, at the same time, preternaturally skilled when it comes to stealing and copying from their US counterparts.

What this and similar stories point to is the fact that techno-Orientalism is a contranym, a word that has two meanings, each of which contradicts the other. This contradictory quality has long been a central aspect of Asian racialization in North America, even prior to the advent of techno-Orientalism. As Colleen Lye writes in *America's Asia*, her influential study of Asian racialization in the twentieth century, discourses surrounding the "yellow peril" and the "model minority" have historically been thought to be in opposition to each other, with the latter

overtaking the former in the late 1960s as a way of understanding Asian immigration to the United States. But Lye argues that rather than conceiving of the yellow peril and model minority narratives as oppositional approaches to Asian raciality, they are "best understood as two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature is the trope of economic efficiency."[27] It is the supposed economic efficiency of the Asian figure that has served as the basis for arguments for exclusion (Asians should be excluded because they threaten American labor, willing to work harder for less pay) *and* assimilation (Asians should be included because they are compliant laborers, willing to work harder for less pay). Based on this logic, the stereotype of the hard-working, economically efficient Asian figure, which is often pegged as emerging during the 1960s as a response to Black civil rights struggles, actually begins to appear much earlier, in the late nineteenth century. Asian racialization is therefore less the result of a racially triangulated relationship with whiteness and Blackness, and more heavily informed by its relationship to capital, labor, and tropes of economic productivity.

Iyko Day further explores the role of Asian bodies in systems of capital and finance in her work *Alien Capital*, arguing that the racialization of the Asian North American figure is tied to settler-colonial logics regarding labor and its relationship to value. Citing critic Neil Levi's work on anti-Semitism, Day argues, "Asians give shape to the abstract circuits of capitalism that have 'no concrete manifestation, that are quite literally *unrepresentable*.'"[28] Day's purpose is to uncover the settler colonial roots of the historical racialization of Asian North American figures in relation to labor and capital, highlighting how the figure of the Asian only comes into being via the violence of capitalist abstraction. But for my purposes, I am particularly interested in Day's theorization of how the abstraction of race—rather than the production of racial difference—makes possible the homogenization of labor into things that are commensurable and have value. In Day's telling, Asian racialization is premised on the notion that the labor of the Asian worker is abstract, versus the concrete, artisanal labor of the white worker.

The laboring Asian subject embodies "abstract processes of value formation," an equivalence that has shifted over the course of the past 150 years, "denigrated as 'cheap' labor" at the end of the nineteenth century before being "valued as 'efficient' in the twenty-first."[29]

K-pop's circulation in the US exemplifies Day's point regarding the relationship between Asian labor, abstraction, and value. Lye argues that Asian racialization in the US is characterized by an "unusual capacity for economic modernity,"[30] but Day's theory enables us to see how the awe expressed over the synchronicity, precision, or efficiency of BTS's embodied performance dovetails with the charge that their work is inorganic, devoid of the distinctiveness or individuality associated with creative labor. A 2018 *New Yorker* article that attempts to explain BTS's popularity to its readership is a case in point. After describing the performers as asexual and incapable of ad-libbing, the writer Amanda Petrusich notes that the "choreography alone is a thing to behold."[31] Admiration for BTS's artistry is immediately undercut by the Petrusich's observation that it is nevertheless "disconcerting to see [such] studied determination applied" to dancing. Petrusich characterizes BTS's music as devoid of carnality or political messaging, omissions that she notes are "fairly staggering in a Western pop context."[32] The article ends with another homage to the "incredible way they [BTS] move."[33] The implication here is clear: Western pop is filled with expressions of sex (which is privileged as a form of individual autonomy) and a resistant politics that challenges listeners to question systems of power. Despite the Orientalist emphasis on "the incredibly way they move," BTS's music, choreography, and fans are disassociated from the bodies of the members and divorced from any notion of the kind of labor that is valued in a settler racial economy. In other words, BTS's labor can be seen and even appreciated, but it has no inherent value.

Similarly, in a seemingly positive article for *Vulture* magazine titled "A Deeper Look at Why BTS Has Thrived in America," also published in 2018, Jakob Dorof begins

by dismissing the notion that there is a "K-pop formula," before spending the rest of the article trying to "crack the group's unique code" in order to understand "*why* BTS is the one K-pop act to have inspired such a following."[34] The invocation of formulas or codes squarely situates BTS's emergence and success within the realm of the hyper-technological. Again, their bodies and labor are rendered in abstractly formulaic terms. Later, Dorof lays BTS's success at the feet of Bang Si-hyuk (known as Hitman Bang), founder of Big Hit Music (rebranded as HYBE in 2021), whose "single and most important stroke of genius may well have been recognizing . . . that America's diehard K-pop fan base had become a big enough demographic to prioritize when creating marketing and content."[35] Dorof also characterizes Bang as a "savant" who "observ[ed] Western K-pop fans and what [made] them tick." Bang's status as a "savant" lies not in his artistic vision or talent in nurturing musical talent but rather in his ability to quantify the demographics of American consumers. Day's theory of Asian labor manifests itself in Dorof's narrative of the group's rise: BTS "give[s] human shape to the abstract circuits of capitalism."[36]

This characterization can also be extended to ARMY, who as I noted at the beginning of this article are often written about with equal amounts of awe, confusion, and contempt. The US media first noted ARMY's fandom when BTS won the fan-voted Top Social Artist at the 2017 Billboard Music Awards, beating out far more famous singers such as Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, Shawn Mendes, and Selena Gomez. ARMY's ability to mobilize was on display when the fanbase organized an online campaign (#MatchAMillion) to match BTS's donation of $1 million to the Black Lives Matter movement and met that goal in little more than 24 hours.[37] The *New York Times* called ARMY the "secret weapon" behind the $4 billion initial public offering of Big Hit Entertainment, responsible for producing a "fire house" of BTS content and "obsess[ing] [over] metrics."[38] Pointing to accounts like @btsanalytics, which "pumps out bone-dry data on album sales, YouTube views and streaming numbers," the *Times* notes that what makes Big Hit and BTS attractive is not their music, but the "huge and highly

connected ecosystem of fans . . . with a deep, even life-changing attachment to the group and its message of inclusivity and self-love."[39] BTS's success then is reduced to and enhanced by the ability of ARMY to absorb reams of "bone-dry data" *and at the same time*, emotionally—perhaps even hysterically—connect with the group's "message" of "self-love."

I will address the ways that BTS and ARMY rewrites this techno-Orientalist narrative later in this article, but for now, it's important to note that ARMY's multiracial and multinational makeup does not seem to impact the racializing discourses surrounding their labor and their relationship to technology. Andrea Acosta notes that K-pop fans often "fail" "online tests of human verification," because of what is perceived to be automated behavior: "a song looped on Spotify too many times, a track purchased and then re-purchased on the same music site, a YouTube video watched too repetitively and without enough variation."[40] Acosta argues that K-pop fans have to a certain extent embraced the power of their "bothood," a move that frames the bot as a "potentially powerful figure," "an effective, flexible strategy for digital movement and grassroots organization online."[41] Kimery Lynch has argued that the relationship between BTS and ARMY is not "top-down" in its orientation but rather "rhizomatic," a structure that enables online communities "to organically create the strong ties between people required for the formation of networked publics."[42] The racialization of K-pop fans as "bots" who are unthinking in their devotion and at the same time disciplined in their repetitive behaviors suggests the way that Asian figurations can be detached from Asian figures. The fans—most of them non-Asian—who devote themselves to BTS in particular and K-pop more broadly thus emblematize Kandice Chuh's long-standing argument that the proper subject of Asian American inquiry is not and should not be an Asian American body or subject but rather the systems that produce knowledge, aesthetics, and labor—the very "practices of subjectivity" that are enacted by epistemologies of difference.[43]

Techno-Orientalizing the “K” in K-pop

Iyko Day’s theory regarding the abstraction of Asian labor is key to understanding the specific form of techno-Orientalism that is applied to K-pop broadly and BTS in particular. It also requires us to think more seriously about a techno-Orientalist discourse within a US-Korean context. Roh, Huang, and Niu argue that one of the most salient features of techno-Orientalism is its “robust flexibility,” which “allows for seamless transportation to another national site.”[44] According to Roh et al, techno-Orientalism’s transposability explains why even though the concept was first theorized in an era that saw the rise of Japan as an economic rival to the United States, it has since the 1990s frequently (although not universally) been associated with an economically ascendent China.[45] Despite the seeming panethnic sweep of techno-Orientalist discourse, it is nevertheless important to consider it as a formation rooted in particular histories and geopolitical narratives. In his discussion of the transformation of cyberpunk throughout the late twentieth century, Christopher T. Fan explains how the rise of a “techno-Orientalism with Chinese characteristics” in the 1990s stemmed from “US perceptions of China’s post-socialist rise and the beginnings of the two countries’ interdependency.”[46] Fan argues that Chinese techno-Orientalist discourse points to a “critical realism of US-China” relations that reflects American Orientalism’s “non-antinomic formations.”[47] Whereas the techno-Orientalism that emerged out of US–Japan relations is based on an antinomic/yellow peril discourse, Fan suggests that other, “emergent,” and “historically variable” articulations of techno-Orientalism are important to consider.[48] For Fan, contemporary science fiction is the ideal vehicle for “studying transformations in American Orientalism” because “in no other genre has Orientalism become such an aesthetic dominant.”[49]

I would suggest that K-pop offers another venue for considering alternative forms of techno-Orientalism, and that K-pop, like science fiction, offers a rich ground for thinking about the historical shifts in US Orientalism, not only because of its

embodied aesthetics but also because the genre emerged out of a relationship between the US and Korea that has been defined by military interventions and cultural imperialism. Unlike Japan or China, Korea has traditionally not been viewed as an economic or military competitor of the US. Geographically and demographically, Korea is not nearly as large as China, and it does not have a history of imperial or overseas ambition as Japan does. Historically, "developing" nations in Asia, such as South Korea, have often been represented as looking to the United States as a model for modernity, political organization, and technological progress; such a relationship is taken as a given. In an article about the pervasiveness of Chinese espionage, Gideon Lewis-Kraus writes without irony about the tendency for "developing nations [to find] a way to free-ride on the novelties of their more advanced peers."[50] Lewis-Kraus adds that "scholars of international relations call this the 'advantage of backwardness," before noting that such an advantage has not always been considered a "bad thing" from the perspective of the developed nations.[51]

This Orientalist notion that "developing nations" benefit from "free-riding" (in other words, stealing) from more developed benefactor nations is also applied to Korea. US attitudes towards Korea have been informed by Korea's status as a Japanese colony during the early twentieth century as well as the opinions of policy and military figures who, in the years during and after the Korean War, viewed "Korea as politically immature, culturally backward, and prone to dictatorship."[52] Bruce Cumings points out that US "contempt for Korea" fully formed during the Korean War, when the country was at "its modern nadir . . . yet this is where most of the millions of Americans who served in Korea got their impressions."[53] US government policy portrayed Koreans as "acted upon," "passive," and "hopelessly factional."[54] By downplaying the roles of Koreans themselves in post–Korean War history and promulgating a view of Korean backwardness, the US government has provided a justification for its military, governmental, and economic interventions on the peninsula for the past several decades.

Lewis-Kraus's characterization of developing countries as simultaneously "backward" and acquisitive speaks to the paradox at the heart of techno-Orientalism, namely that techno-Orientalism represents an antipodal relationship between the Orient and technology: Asians are technologically advanced, Asians are technologically incompetent. As I noted earlier, most scholarship on techno-Orientalism has focused on its hyper-technological manifestations in Asiatic racial formation; indeed, techno-Orientalist discourse directed toward Japan and China has traditionally focused on the hyper-technological attributes of those countries. I would suggest that American techno-Orientalist responses towards K-pop and BTS are deeply informed by the contradiction that techno-Orientalism names. Techno-Orientalism enables K-pop to be dismissed because of a history that positions Korea as primitive in comparison to the United States, and at the same time, techno-Orientalism enables K-pop to be contained because of the perceived qualities that make it a threat to the United States.

These techno-Orientalist narratives of K-pop—that K-pop reflects the hypo-technological primitiveness of South Korea vis-à-vis the United States and that K-pop reflects the hyper-technological and abstracted labor of Korean performers—are contiguous with each other. Techno-Orientalist discourse as it pertains to K-pop and BTS is most frequently and visibly characterized by an emphasis on the mechanistic, synchronous, and surface-oriented aspects of BTS as performers. In an interview, *Late Late Show* host James Corden, who has had BTS on his show several times, called BTS "organic and unique" before pivoting immediately to the following statement: "It never feels like they're in the machine. They are the machine."[55] When asked by an audience member of *The Daily Show* what it was like to meet BTS, Trevor Noah, who had met the group when hosting the Grammy's in 2022, responded in complimentary terms about the group's friendliness as well as the joy he felt in being with them. He then added: "And they're so good and efficient at what they do. Like, they hit their marks, they're learning their moves . . . But like, really precise, you know?"[56] An *Entertainment Weekly* cover story about the band marveled at the "disconcertingly pretty"

appearance of the members, labelling them the “avatars of [the] poreless,” and “real life Snapchat filters.”[57]

However, this view of BTS’s hyper-technological efficiency is contiguous with a narrative of Korean hypo-technology in relation to the West. This doubling can be seen in much of what is produced about Korean popular culture, sometimes in the same article, sometimes in the span of a few sentences. Then-President Trump blasted *Parasite* after it won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2019 by arguing that it in no way measured up against past winners, “classic” Hollywood films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).[58] In the same breath, he noted ominously that “We’ve got enough problems with South Korea, with trade. On top of it, they give them the best movie of the year?”[59] The crudeness of Trump’s rhetoric notwithstanding, his remarks reflect the antipodal quality of techno-Orientalist discourse as it relates to Korea. Dorof, in his article on BTS’s rise, reproduces that logic, defining K-pop as a cruder, less evolved form of western pop that BTS had to leave behind in order to achieve global fame. He writes that the release of the EP *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part 1*, marked a change for the group as it abandoned the “dated charm” of K-pop production and embraced a “contemporary” sound that combined “lambent synths and lush reverb, [while] incorporating shades of novel subgenres like cloud rap and future bass.”[60] Even as he dismisses the Korean influences on BTS’s music for being antiquated and premodern, Dorof ascribes BTS’s growing stardom to their study and embrace of the more complex musicality of Western electronic genres. It is precisely these types of electronic features, however, that Dorof will cite later in the article as evidence of BTS’s “niche” appeal.

Indeed, it is South Korea’s supposed position as America’s junior partner in Cold War histories that informs the other notable reaction to K-pop’s rise: a strong unwillingness to believe or accept that anything so popular or dominant could emerge out of a country like Korea. In the conclusion to the article that I cited above, Dorof insinuates that sales of the group’s newly released smash album

Love Yourself: Tear as well as the tickets for its sold-out North American concert tour are "bogus." The story of BTS is "the story of . . . how seven young men managed to reach No. 1 on Billboard on the strength of what is essentially the largest, most enthusiastic niche audience in the country."[61] In a *The New Yorker* video that attempts to explain K-pop's popularity, Jeff Rabhan, then music executive and chair of the Clive Davis institute of Recorded Music at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, poses the question—"Is K-pop *the* thing?"—before answering, "Nowhere close."[62] Rabhan goes on to declare that "without question, BTS or larger K-pop groups are going to be able to sell tickets in New York City and certainly sell out Madison Square Garden and do well probably in the top Korean American markets in the US, but beyond that they can't."[63] Rabham's comment is inflected with a certain kind of coastal elitism that depends on certain notions of race, class, and culture but what is key for the purposes of my argument is his belief that K-pop can only appeal to those of Korean descent. His assumption that BTS's popularity can be explained by a certain ethnic tribalism relies upon a notion that Korean popular culture cannot appeal globally.

Dorof anad Rabham's responses to BTS's emergence resound with Euny Hong's experience surrounding the publication of her book, *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World through Pop Culture*.[64] Hong's work—part memoir, part cultural history—rehearses an argument that has been debated in several scholarly works on K-pop: namely, the role of the Korean government in the late 1990s and early 2000s in marketing and exporting Korean cultural productions to Asia and then the West. John Lie argues that up until the late 1990s, the music industry in Korea had been "resolutely domestic in orientation and consumption."[65] The financial crisis of 1997 and the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) fundamentally shifted that focus. K-pop scholar Crystal Anderson notes that that the Korean government began supporting popular Korean music, television, and film in the wake of the IMF crisis as a way of "generat[ing] profits in a global market and spread[ing] Korean

cultural values globally."[66] This is echoed by Lie, who asserts that the IMF crisis "underscored the urgency of cultivating new audiences and new markets."[67] Suk-Young Kim acknowledges the "Korean government's persistent series of campaigns to advance its cultural influence" but argues that the flows of popular culture cannot be satisfactorily explained by an excavation of governmental policies alone.[68] While scholars and critics have gone back and forth on the extent of the Korean government's influence on Hallyu, the general consensus seems to be that government subsidies and directives enabled Korean producers to create shows, music, and films with an eye for foreign markets.

This scholarly conversation that seeks to explain the historical and geopolitical circumstances that lead to the rise of Hallyu has been simplified in US mainstream culture into the notion that the Korean government was and continues to be directly involved in creating and driving the dissemination of Korean culture, particularly K-pop. Hong's gloss of these facts in her manuscript *The Birth of Korean Cool* leads to a rejection by one editor on the grounds that,

the "Gangnam Style" video . . . didn't really get a billion views. The Korean government had hired 10,000 people to click on the video 100,000 times, he insisted. Like many other people I have encountered, he recoiled at the idea that a tiny, formerly destitute Asian country could have pulled off a global cultural coup without some kind of shenanigans.[69]

The editor's disbelief that anything notable could emerge from a country like Korea plays into familiar nationalist narratives that see the US as the producer of both culture and commerce. But what is noteworthy here is the specific insistence that the Korean government "hired 10,000 people to click on the video 100,000 times." Although their assessments of Korean popular culture seem to be diametrically opposed, what Dorof, Rabham, and this unnamed book editor share is the firm belief that K-pop's popularity is being driven by a mechanized and automated process, overseen by master marketeers like Hitman Bang or the

omnipresent Korean government. Underlying both of these assumptions is a belief that "tiny, formerly destitute" countries like Korea are incapable of creating—let alone participating in—cultural products that appeal globally and that therefore shadowy governmental entities/substitutes must be deliberately manipulating platforms like YouTube to drive those numbers. In other words, the seeming omnipresence of K-pop has somehow been manufactured, whether by the Korean government or a fanatical group of "niche" fans whose devotion to BTS (in particular) drives this type of robotic and repetitive behavior. K-pop and BTS's popularity is not the result of their musical, lyrical, or choreographic innovations, but rather purely the result of an automated process in which individuals, because they are paid to or because they are brainwashed, robotically click on links hundreds of thousands of times with the goal of driving up view counts, purchasing singles, or filling up stadiums.

The insistence that BTS produces music for "niche" audiences and is supported by bot armies constructs K-pop music and performance as a token of exchange for votes on social media and purchases on streaming sites and apps. To restate Day's theorization of the abstraction of Asian labor, BTS's recording, production, and performance of their music "becomes progressively abstract, moving from concrete reality to the spectral domain of capital."[70] In other words, the discourse around K-pop broadly and BTS in particular positions them not as artists or musicians but rather attractive vehicles for the manufacture, production, and dissemination of a product that can be bundled with music, books, glow sticks, and other merchandise.

BTS and ARMY: The Empire Hwaits Back

While the band has generally not responded to criticisms regarding the legitimacy of their popularity, RM briefly addressed the controversy in a 2021 cover story for

Billboard magazine, suggesting that the group is an "easy target" because they are a K-pop act with "high fan loyalty."[71] RM's comment not only obliquely references the racism that the band has faced but also pushes back on techno-Orientalist narratives that insist on chart manipulation. I argue that his comment speaks to the ways that the group—and its fans—reject narratives that portray K-pop as a form of abstract labor, accomplished only for its automaticity and mechanical difficulty. "Hwaiting"—taken from the English word "fighting"—is a Korean term that expresses support or encouragement, a term that captures the extent to which BTS's success globally is as much a result of their *resistance* to techno-Orientalist narratives as it is an enactment of those narratives. In the many videos that the group publishes on their social media, the very materials that critics often identify as part of the BTS "machine," BTS members reject portrayals of their music or their performances as hyper-technological, modern, or seamlessly synchronic; quite the contrary. If the work of settler capital is to construct Asian labor as abstract and therefore antinomical to the romanticized concrete labor that is valued and valuable, then BTS's insistence on revealing the "thingly"-ness of their work—the endless dance practices, the grueling concert schedule, the long hours in the hair and make-up chair—seems to be a refutation of that form of anti-Asian racialization.

This emphasis on the physical and emotional labor that goes into the performance process is perhaps most visible in the dozens of dance practice videos that the band has recorded over the years. Dance practice videos are standard in the K-pop industry and in their earliest incarnations consisted of unedited footage of K-pop groups dancing to the choreography of a song in a rehearsal space.[72] Until recently,[73] BTS's dance practice videos were characterized by their relatively raw production value: a single, fixed camera records the members as they dance, dressed in sweats, without hair or make-up. Before HYBE moved its headquarters into a gleaming new building in 2021, BTS's practice videos were generally filmed in a cramped dance studio with equipment sometimes visible in the background. The practice rooms were lit with the kind of fluorescent track lighting that one

finds in hospitals or office buildings. During the practice, the song track played over the room's sound system, and the members, although they sometimes mouth along to the lyrics, made no pretense that they were singing live. The mic often picked up the squeaking of the members' sneakers on the wooden floor (although they were occasionally barefoot) and their heavy breathing as they executed the steps. In a dance practice for "IDOL" (which is frequently identified by the members as one of the most difficult choreographies to perform), the members were visibly and audibly fatigued by the time the song is over—you could hear them panting as they sank to the floor. The practice videos emphasize the somatic and corporeal qualities of each member, making visible or audible each intake of breath, each leap off the ground, each movement of the body. In other words, BTS's dance practice videos effectively affirm the members are not "technologically infused persons" but rather embodied, *organic* humans who breathe, sweat, and move.[74]

The "IDOL" dance practice also highlights another way that I argue BTS contravenes narratives of Asian racialization: by drawing attention to the fact that the members *make mistakes*. Note that this is not part of a yellow peril narrative that insists on the fragility of the Asian body—quite the contrary. The failure here has to do with BTS's insistence—often humorous, always gentle—on the fallibility of their bodies and the variability of human performance in any context. On the surface, this doesn't seem all that remarkable, but if techno-Orientalism works to abstract BTS from the concreteness of their own labor then I would argue that one of the ways that members have attempted to thwart the naturalness of that association is by emphasizing the embodied qualities of their lives as musicians and performers, particularly when those bodies do not move as planned. To put it another way, if the racializing discourses surrounding K-pop rely upon the notion of Asian labor as an abstraction that is reproducible, in which "mistakes and ad-libs are unthinkable,"[75] as *The New Yorker* argues and almost every popular story about the group echoes, then BTS and ARMY's insistence on the members'

missteps, shortcomings, and blunders provides a powerful rebuttal to that broader cultural narrative.

Even though they are not the focus of most news stories about the group, examples of BTS's mistakes abound. Over the years, Jin, the oldest member, has made a running joke out of the difficulty of the group's choreography, talking openly about the fact that he needs extra time to learn the moves compared to the other members. During the comeback special for *Map of the Soul: 7* (which was released during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020), RM asks Jin a question about the difficulty of the choreography for the album. Jin begins his response seriously, noting "I'm not as good at learning the moves compared to others."[76] As the other members vigorously counter this assertion ("Don't say such a thing," and "We know the best since we're there"), Jin insists, "It's possible that my abilities are less than yours." As the other members continue to defend his abilities as a dancer, Jin ironically orders them not to raise their voices to him, causing the entire group to dissolve in laughter. The members also constantly joke about the fear they feel if they make a choreography mistake in front of J-Hope, the group's unofficial dance captain and its most graceful and innovative dancer. The joke is so widely known that it was a part of a game played on BTS's long-running variety web show, *Run BTS*.

Importantly, ARMY seems to delight in the group's errors as much as the individual members do. There is an entire subcategory of BTS fan videos on social media channels like YouTube that compile the group's choreography missteps both in live performances and in music videos. These videos, which have tens of millions of views, frequently refer to the mistakes as "cute" or praise the members for how quickly and gracefully they recover from the error. One of the most thorough of this kind of fan post can be found on a YouTube account called @SugArmyy. In painstaking detail, utilizing graphics and various editing techniques, the owner of this account analyzes a mistake on Jimin's part during the group's live performance of its hit song "Idol" on the morning show *Good*

Morning America in September 2018.[77] We see clips of BTS's own behind-the-scenes video after the performance, in which the members tease Jimin about his mistake. The focus on BTS's mistakes suggests that ARMY's appreciation of the group is based in part on their fallibility, and not so much on their perfection. In other words, the fans enjoy the fact that the choreography is difficult *and* frequently imperfect. This emphasis on variation and asynchronicity, coupled with the pleasure that both BTS and their fans take in narrating and re-narrating these imprecisions, offers a powerful counter to the prevailing narrative of the BTS "machine" or ARMY "bots."

Conclusion: COVID-19 and the Biggest Boy Band in the World

If BTS exemplifies certain strains of Asian racialization as it relates to labor, technology, and histories of imperialism, then how can we read the group's unprecedented mainstream success and national visibility during the pandemic? Although BTS have been global superstars since 2017—with sold-out multinational stadium tours, appearances on American award and television shows, billions in sales and streams, and countless brand partnerships—it wasn't until after COVID-19 hit in the summer of 2020, at the height of pandemic lockdowns when fear of the virus was at its most intense, that the band reached its heights of US fame. Their ascent started with the release of the single "Dynamite," their first #1 on the Billboard Hot 100. In early October, the group hit #1 again with "Savage Love (Laxed—Siren Beat)," a remix with Jawsh 685 and Jason Derulo. Nearly two months after that, "Life Goes On," the title track of their fifth studio album *BE*, became the group's third #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 and the first song primarily sung in Korean to occupy the top slot. 2021 brought three more #1 hits with "Butter," "Permission to Dance," and "My Universe," a

collaboration with British band Coldplay, as well as the Artist of the Year honors at the American Music Awards, the first Asian musicians to win that title.

Four days after the release of "Dynamite," on August 25, 2020, COVID-19 became the third-leading cause of death in the United States, with deaths exceeding 1000 per day. Two weeks later, the World Health Organization reported 5.8 million cases of COVID-19 in the United States, a number that represented 25% of the global total.[78] From the earliest days of the public health crisis, then-President Donal Trump frequently referred to the COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" or "Kung flu," with members of his administration and the Republican party following his lead.[79] Researchers found that Trump's first documented use of the phrase "Chinese virus," in a tweet posted on March 16, 2020, led to a proliferation of anti-Asian speech on Twitter.[80] As COVID-19 spread, Asians living in the United States experienced a surge in racially motivated crimes and violence.[81] Between 2000 and 2021, more than 9000 incidents of anti-Asian violence were logged on a website run by Stop AAPI Hate. In a survey taken in April 2021, one-third of Asian adults (32%) said they personally knew an Asian person in the US who has been threatened or attacked because of their race.[82]

While it's easy to ascribe BTS's US chart success during COVID-19 to their decision to sing in English, I want to conclude this article by asking what it means that a Korean pop group catapulted to the top of the charts and the heart of mainstream US popular culture at the very moment that the nation was also leveling a wave of rhetorical and physical violence at Asian Americans and Asian diasporans for supposedly creating and then spreading a deadly virus that has been widely racialized as Chinese. How can we unpack the seeming contradiction of BTS's popularity at this historical juncture?

As I've argued throughout this article, that contradiction isn't really a contradiction but rather a function of the way that Asians are racialized in the United States. In the case of the pandemic: one version of COVID-19's origins

imagines Chinese scientists in the Wuhan Institute of Virology using advanced biomedical technology to engineer the virus for global dissemination, while another depicts Chinese tradespeople sitting amidst caged animals in a wet market in Wuhan, passively becoming vectors of contagion, their bodies utterly resistant to modern technologies of hygiene, food preparation, and consumption. In one scenario, Asian laborers mechanically produce new viruses in technologically advanced settings; in the other, they cage and prepare animals to be eaten. Both of those stories, although seemingly oppositional in the way they depict China's relationship to technology and the workers who produce it, nevertheless gained a tremendous amount of traction during the early days of the pandemic. The contranymic aspects of techno-Orientalism in particular and Asian racialization more broadly also explain one of the more unexpected forms of anti-Asian violence that emerged out of the pandemic: that of assailants spitting on Asian victims, often while accusing them of being the source of the virus.[83] Spitting has long been used in racist attacks to express contempt, disrespect, or hatred, and that is no different in these recent cases. Within the context of the pandemic, the spitting serves another purpose: to symbolically infect the victim's body with the virus, with the attacker's bodily fluids serving as the vehicle for transmission. Spitting on Asian individuals in this context suggests that the attacker's body contains the very virus that he or she is accusing the victim of creating or transmitting. Even within the realm of racist violence—which operates under its own convoluted logic of hate, anxiety, and fear—using one's own saliva to infect Asian people with the very disease that one is blaming them for spreading is a head-scratcher. Such an act seems impossible to understand, until we recall that Asian racialization depends on an uneven reversal: the virus is an expression of Asian technological modernity and, at the same time and equally true, the virus can easily kill weaker, less developed Asian bodies.

The prolific and mostly fawning coverage of BTS in 2020 does not disrupt or dispel the seemingly contradictory representations of Asians as techno-Orientalist drones or infectious agents. BTS's ascent, in other words, is not a sign

of the nation's desire to live or even envision a more racially just future. If anything, the pandemic has made starkly clear the premise of my argument: that the faultline running through contemporary Asian racial formation oscillates between a series of misalignments or seeming contradictions. Asians embody the highly synthetic and mechanistic (such as BTS) *and* simultaneously are figures of lumpen, infectious, unevolved flesh (in relation to COVID-19).

BTS's emergence as "the most popular band in the world" at a time of increased anti-Asian xenophobia and violence signals the ways in which techno-Orientalist Asiatic racial form combines with long-standing anxieties about Asian bodies as contaminants, or what Quinn Lester describes as "yellow life as antinomy for western life."[84] At the same time that the nation is discursively and physically assaulting Asian bodies for spreading a virus, it expresses awe of Asian bodies' flawless dancing, "smooth vocals," and seemingly "perfectly calibrated" movements.[85] What COVID-19 makes clear is that the seemingly rapturous response to BTS is not a sign of the nation's progressive willingness to embrace Asian diasporic subjects or productions, but rather emblematic of long-running narratives of Asian racial formation. Even the biggest boy band in the world, at the height of its popularity, can't completely escape the pull of histories of Asian racialization.

Notes

1. Tim Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army Are Rendering the Pop Charts Useless," *StereoGum*, June 2, 2021, https://www.stereogum.com/2149730/bts-butter-hot-100-billboard-chart/columns/sounding-board < https://www.stereogum.com/2149730/bts-butter-hot-100-billboard-chart/columns/sounding-board/> . ↩
2. Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army." ↩
3. Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army." ↩
4. Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army." ↩
5. Billboard BREAKDOWN, "Billboard Breakdown – Hot 100 – July 3, 2021 (BALL IF I WANT TO, LUMBERJACK, working, Fancy Like)," *YouTube*, June 29, 2021,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14sckHSrwgM < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14sckHSrwgM> .

6. Bryan Rolli, "BTS's Enduring Success Is Forcing People to Rethink the Charts," *Forbes*, July 1, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2021/07/01/btss-enduring-success-is-forcing-people-to-rethink-the-charts/?sh=4930609042b7 < https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2021/07/01/btss-enduring-success-is-forcing-people-to-rethink-the-charts/?sh=4930609042b7> .

7. Chris Molanphy, "The Kid Laroi and Justin Bieber Finally Kicked BTS From Billboard's Top Slot," *Slate*, August 19, 2021, https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/kid-laroi-justin-bieber-stay-bts-song-of-summer-2021-billboard.html < https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/kid-laroi-justin-bieber-stay-bts-song-of-summer-2021-billboard.html> , emphasis added.

8. Chris Molanphy, "BTS Are Playing—and Winning—the Billboard Charts Game Fair and Square," *Slate*, June 5, 2021, https://slate.com/culture/2021/06/bts-butter-billboard-hot-100.html < https://slate.com/culture/2021/06/bts-butter-billboard-hot-100.html> .

9. In an article about the band that appeared in *Billboard* magazine, the writer Jeyup S. Kwaak notes that the Hot 100's purpose is "accurately highlighting the world's most popular acts." Jeyup S. Kwaak, "Inside the Business of BTS—and the Challenges Ahead," *Billboard*, August 26, 2021, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-billboard-cover-story-2021-interview-9618967 < https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-billboard-cover-story-2021-interview-9618967/> .

10. The members have repeatedly spoken of their desire to sing and rap predominantly in Korean; however, neither the band nor its management company have ever been secretive about their global ambitions, manifested most recently in HYBE's $1 billion acquisition of Ithaca Holdings from Scooter Braun.

11. Examples of this type of violence abound. Ridicule of BTS as well as other male K-Pop singers and performers often centers around their presentation of a more androgynous or "softer" masculinity. See Jeehyun Jenny Lee, Rachel Kar Yee Lee, and Ji Hoon Park, "Unpacking K-pop in America: The Subversive Potential of Male K-pop Idols' Soft Masculinity," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 5900–19, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13514/3281 < https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13514/3281> . To name one of the more recent examples, Joe Budden, a former hip-hop artist and current broadcaster who has been called "the Howard Stern of hip-hop," ranted in a widely circulated podcast episode that he didn't want to "hear that shit," meaning BTS's music, nor to "see them dance moves. I don't wanna see you come down from the sky in a little umbrella." While Budden's reference might be read as a typical homophobic trope (assuming that "little umbrellas" is a reference to "fairies" and the wands they carry), he also imagines the members "link{ing} up like Voltron." He ends his diatribe by misstating the band's home country as China. See Gil Kaufman, "Joe Budden under Fire for Saying He 'Hates' BTS, Misstates that They're from China," *Billboard*, April 7, 2022,

https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/joe-budden-hates-bts-missates-from-china-podcast-1235056483 < https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/joe-budden-hates-bts-missates-from-china-podcast-1235056483/> . The combination of hetero-nationalism, homophobia, and misogyny also pervades responses to a social media post by the Los Angeles Dodgers, who noted the presence of BTS member Suga at one of their home games. One social media user wrote: "Americans don't like that crap, except pre teen girls {*sic*}." See Sara Delgado, "The BTS ARMY Called Out People Who Made Racist Comments about a Photo of Suga at a Dodgers Game," *Teen Vogue*, May 10, 2019, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-army-called-out-racist-comments-photo-suga-dodgers-game < https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-army-called-out-racist-comments-photo-suga-dodgers-game> . ↩

12. Soo Kim, "James Corden Upsets BTS Fans After Calling ARMY '15-Year-Olds,'" *Newsweek*, September 22, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/james-corden-backlash-bts-fans-un-general-assembly-new-york-1631419 < https://www.newsweek.com/james-corden-backlash-bts-fans-un-general-assembly-new-york-1631419> . ↩

13. An "ARMY Census" conducted on Twitter by @amidocumentary, @BTS_iTunesZA, @liltove, @ResearchBTS, and @OWOLMovie collected over 562,000 responses between April 1 and May 31, 2022. The vast majority of respondents (over 96%) identified as female. Nearly 70% of respondents were over the age of 18 with 18–29-year-olds making up the largest cohort. In addition, about 44% of respondents resided in Central or Latin America. Viewers located in Japan made up the largest percentage of those watching BTS's YouTube channel, followed by viewers in India and Mexico. For views by country, see Statista Research Department, "Number of Views of K-pop Group BTS Videos on YouTube," August 23, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/973644/south-korea-bts-youtube-channel-views-by-country < https://www.statista.com/statistics/973644/south-korea-bts-youtube-channel-views-by-country> . ↩

14. According to an Asian American Foundation report, 21% of Americans believe that Asian Americans are "partly responsible" for COVID-19. See The Asian American Foundation, "STAATUS (Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the US) Index Report 2022," https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf < https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf> . ↩

15. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2. My emphasis. ↩

16. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 14. ↩

17. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979), 35. ↩

18. Toshiya Ueno, "Techno-Orientalism and Media Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture," *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (1999): 97, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829908576801 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829908576801> .

19. David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (Routledge, 1995), 6.

20. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 7.

21. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 9.

22. Lok Siu and Claire Chun, "Yellow Peril and Techno-Orientalism in the time of Covid-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 3 (2020): 425, https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0033 < https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0033> .

23. Siu and Chun, "Yellow Peril," 430.

24. The cases brought against Wen Ho Lee, Chi Mak, Dongfan Chung, Walter Liew, and Wenfeng Lu garnered the most publicity.

25. See news stories related to Charles Lieber, the chair of the chemistry and chemical biology department at Harvard University, or Enrique Lavernia, former provost at the University of California, Irvine.

26. Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "The Daring Ruse that Exposed China's Campaign to Steal American Secrets," *New York Times*, March 7, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/magazine/china-spying-intellectual-property.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/magazine/china-spying-intellectual-property.html> .

27. Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

28. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), 8. See also Neil Levi, "'See That Straw? That's a Straw': Anti-Semitism and Narrative Form in *Ulysses*," *Modernism/modernity* 9, no. 3 (2002): 375–88, https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2002.0056 < https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2002.0056> , emphasis in original.

29. Day, *Alien Capital*, 8.

30. Lye, *America's Asia*, 3.

31. Amanda Petrusich, "Two Theories on How K-pop Made it to No. 1 in America," *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/two-theories-on-how-k-pop-made-it-to-no-1-in-america < https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/two-theories-on-how-k-pop-made-it-to-no-1-in-america> .

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33. Petrusich, "Two Theories." ↩

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35. Dorok, "A Deeper Look." ↩

36. Day, *Alien Capital*, 8. ↩

37. Aditi Bhandari, Gerry Doyle, and Stephen Coates, "The Mobilizing Power of the BTS Army," *The Financial Post*, July 15, 2020, https://financialpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/the-mobilizing-power-of-the-bts-army < https://financialpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/the-mobilizing-power-of-the-bts-army> . ↩

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40. Andrea Acosta, "Bots and Binaries: On the Failure of Human Verification," *Post45*, February 23, 2023, https://post45.org/2023/02/bots-and-binaries-on-the-failure-of-human-verification < https://post45.org/2023/02/bots-and-binaries-on-the-failure-of-human-verification> . ↩

41. Acosta, "Bots and Binaries." ↩

42. Kimery Lynch, "Fan Activists or Activists Who Happen to Be Fans?," *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review*, no. 3 (2021), https://ther3journal.com/issue-3/fan-activists-or-activists-who-happen-to-be-fans < https://ther3journal.com/issue-3/fan-activists-or-activists-who-happen-to-be-fans> . ↩

43. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Duke University Press, 2003), 10–11. ↩

44. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 11. ↩

45. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 3. ↩

46. Christopher T. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 2, https://doi.org/10.5070/T861019585 < https://doi.org/10.5070/T861019585> . ↩

47. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism," 3. ↩

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49. Fan, “Techno-Orientalism,” 3. ↩

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Article details

Julia H. Lee, "BTS and the Labor of Techno-Orientalism," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.5

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053